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THE OLD FORT ON THE SAN SABA RIVER AS SEEN BY  
DR. FERDINAND ROEMER IN 1847.

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The identification of old landmarks, and their preservation, are objects worthy of engaging the interest of all Texans. Exact records of their location, their dimensions, and their surroundings as written down by actual observers are invaluable to the student of our early history, and in offering the following account of the old fort on the San Saba river, I hope to elicit further information on this interesting subject.

The year 1845 witnessed a large emigration from Germany to Texas, and with a view to gaining an accurate scientific knowledge of the country, its geological formation so far as possible, and its agricultural capabilities, an extensive journey of exploration was undertaken by Dr. Ferdinand Roemer, an eminent German scholar, which began November, 1845, and ended April, 1847. The results of this journey were published in August, 1849, at Bonn, Germany. The book called *Texas* comprises 464 pages, of which 362 are narrative, the remainder consisting of notes on the geognostic conditions, and on the flora and fauna observed by the author. There is besides a large map of the country as then known.

Starting out from New Orleans on board the steamship Galveston on November 20, 1845, Dr. Roemer had already passed one year and nearly three months in the then unexplored wilds of Texas, and had reached the neighborhood of the favorite hunting grounds of the Comanche Indians, when his attention was arrested by a remarkable feature in the landscape; and, true to the instincts of the scientist, he made a minute record of what he saw, giving probably the earliest accurate account of the dimensions of the old fort on the San Saba river. This account, which is to be found in the book referred to, beginning on page 308, is translated as follows:

"February 18 [1847]. Our way led us today over many pretty little prairies, when, after having traveled nearly six English miles, and not surmising that we were so near our goal, we beheld, through the mesquite trees in the distance, an object resembling old masonry. We came nearer and found ourselves before the ruins of

quite an extensive building; we had reached the old Spanish fort or mission on the San Saba river. Our first impression was that of amazement at finding in the midst of this wilderness in which we had traveled about so long, and in which we knew ourselves to be many days journey from the abode of civilized men, this incontrovertible evidence of the former permanent abode of white people. Through an aperture in the masonry we entered an inner courtyard and found there a suitable place for our tents. The fort lies close to the river on the left or north bank, which is here about twenty feet high. The ruins consist of remnants of masonry work five to six feet high (in some places from fifteen to twenty feet), and plainly show the design of the whole structure. The outer walls of masonry are an almost square rectangle whose shorter wall, lying near the river, measures 300 feet, while the longer wall measures 360. On to the inner side of this outer wall are built several casemates, or rooms, each eighteen feet deep and opening into the courtyard. The whole number of these surrounding the court is about fifty. In the northwest corner of the plot of ground is a main building with a courtyard and seven rooms, the walls of which are still partially preserved as high as the upper crossbeams. The main entrance to the fort lay on the west side, and besides this there was a little opening towards the water. On three corners of the fort there were projecting towers for defense and on the northwest corner a larger and round tower. The quarry stones of which the walls were constructed were held together with earth only, but in the wall of the main building we observed traces of mortar.

“The plan of the whole structure is, in its main features, the same as that of the Spanish missions near San Antonio; but the church, which, in harmony with its religious purpose, the conversion of the Indians, is the largest and most notable building in the larger California missions, as well as in those of San Antonio, was here either entirely wanting, or was only very small and insignificant. Neither is there any indication that the land around the fort was ever cultivated, nor is there any trace of an aqueduct for the irrigation of the land, which is never missing in the other missions. Both circumstances arouse many doubts as to whether this was really a mission. It was perhaps nothing more than a strong point for guarding the San Saba valley. Of the ultimate fate of this fort little more than tradition is known in Texas. It is said

to have been besieged by Comanches in the last quarter of the last century, the Spanish garrison, starved into submission, was massacred, and the building destroyed. Undoubtedly documents from which a conclusion as to the facts may be drawn are to be found in Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

"The large mesquite trees and the cacti of the *Opuntia* species of a man's height with cylindrical limbs, which are growing in the inner courtyard and the casemates, strongly indicate that for many generations past no human being has inhabited the place. On the walls of the main entrance the names of the few who have visited it during this century are engraved. These names are as follows: Padilla, 1810; Cos, 1829; Bowie (*con sua* [sic] *tropa*), 1829; Moore, 1840; the first two Mexicans, and the two latter Texan leaders who in their military expeditions against the Comanches had reached this part of the country.

"On the following day, February 19th,<sup>2</sup> we inspected the surrounding country, and its charm seems to justify the selection of this point for the location of the fort. A perfectly smooth level plain of very productive soil covered with a tender grass extends on both sides of the river. The width of the flat bottom of this valley measures more than an English mile, while it extends for five or six English miles along the river and constitutes the largest area of arable fertile land we have seen on the whole upper course of the San Saba river. All along the river there is a line of timber which could furnish wood sufficient for the needs of a small settlement. But except this growth of the bottom there is no timber to be found and notably are the postoaks missing here, which we saw had formed an extensive forest further down, and which always furnish the best wood for fences. The river in the vicinity of the fort is deep (though easily passable by several fords), as clear as crystal, and swift in its course. On both sides it receives confluent.

"On the other side of the river we ascended a steep bluff, about 150 feet high. Having reached the top, we could see for many miles around; we were on the summit of the plateau. Nowhere could

<sup>1</sup>See Bancroft's *North Mexican States and Texas*, I 626-629.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

<sup>2</sup>The original has "13ten," but this is obviously a misprint.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

mountain chains or even separate peaks be seen rise; *the San Saba mountains, as they are laid down on most maps, in reality do not exist.*

"According to a supposition widespread in Texas rich silver mines were formerly worked by the Spaniards near the San Saba river, indeed, even the old fort is said to have been erected solely for the purpose of affording protection to a mine situated in the vicinity. Besides the investigation of the fitness of the soil for cultivation, one of the main purposes of our expeditions was to determine the grounds for these suppositions. We searched, therefore, in the immediate vicinity of the fort for the ruins of a smelter, or for slag piles, and when this search proved fruitless, we tried to ascertain whether the geological conditions of the surrounding country were such as to render the existence here of ore or metal probable or even possible.

"The above mentioned precipitous bluff presented a good profile of exposed rock strata. These consist of alternating layers of a rather hard yellowish gray limestone with a rough earthy fracture, and loose calcareous marl of the same color. All these layers are perfectly horizontal; so that it would have been possible without any difficulty, as may still readily be seen, to find a solid bank formed by the upper portion of the profile for the building of the fort on the flat surface of the plateau. The strata contain a number of organic remains. The species are the same that occur in the calcareous marls at Fredericksburg. They are undoubtedly forms peculiar to the chalk formation and leave no doubt as to the age of the strata in which they occur. The same rock is the main constituent of the soil for miles around the fort in all the other directions, although in most places not visible on the surface. Under such conditions in the geognostic deposits, we can unhesitatingly assert that, at least in the neighborhood of the fort, no deposit of precious metal is to be found; the existence of silver ore in uniformly horizontal strata of limestone and marl of the chalk formation would according to our experience hitherto be without a parallel. It is by no means our intention, however, with this assertion to deny absolutely the existence of silver ore on the San Saba river; on the contrary, it were not improbable that the metamorphic transitional rocks, rich in quartz, which occur farther down on the San Saba (about forty English miles from its mouth), as well as

the granite rocks which occur especially between the San Saba and the Llano, may contain ore, although the observations made on our journey do not furnish a direct proof even of this."

In connection with the probability of silver mines having existed in the neighborhood of the old fort or mission, von Roemer refers in a note to the story current among the early settlers of Texas to the effect that the Comanche Indians were accustomed to use silver bullets in their guns.

Our geological survey has long ere this settled the question as to the existence of silver ore in this vicinity, and it is hoped that the recent acquisitions of valuable historical records from Mexico may afford our future historians accurate data as to the rise and fall of this old fort or mission, but it would be interesting at least to know the present condition of these historic ruins.